

June 2001

Argus aircraft leaves Kirtland due to lack of funds

by Conrad Dziewulski, Directed Energy Public Affairs

KIRTLAND AFB, N.M. — A long-time familiar sight and a unique flying research laboratory has disappeared from the skies.

The C-135E aircraft known as Argus with its distinctive Tasmanian devil nose decor flew its last data-gathering mission last summer conducting atmospheric tests for the Airborne Laser program.

Grounded because of lack of funds for required maintenance, the aircraft was flown to the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center or “boneyard” at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., where it will be stored to await its final disposition.

The Argus flight test program was a unique opportunity for Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL), allowing its highly skilled scientists and engineers to take technological developments from the laboratory and test them in the field. This flying research laboratory not only supported the Department of Defense but also the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Department of Energy and the Airborne Laser System Program Office.

“Its biggest capability was to provide a low-cost airborne platform for research and development,” explained Capt. Craig Phillips, chief, Mission Operations. Flight costs were very competitive with others because of Air Force flight and operations crews.

According to Phillips, it was the only Air Force C-135E capable of flying extended missions up to 50,000 feet above the earth’s surface making it unique in the Air Force inventory.

The Argus program officially began in 1986 to collect data on rocket plume phenomena, reentry vehicle signatures, kill assessments and sensor checkout for the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization, the forerunner to the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization. The program and aircraft are named for the many-eyed and thus vigilant Greek mythological character.

One of its most important missions was to conduct treaty



AIRCRAFT LEAVES KIRTLAND - Airman 1st Class Craig R. Miller, crew chief with Detachment 2, 418th Flight Test Squadron, works on the landing gear system of the Argus C-135E aircraft prior to its departure.

verification flights for the Defense Nuclear Agency in 1990. Major upgrades that year qualified it for ultraviolet, visible, mid-wave and long-wave infrared imaging and spectroscopy.

The current aircraft arrived here in 1990 and was owned and operated by Detachment 2 of the 452nd flight Test Squadron. AFRL’s Directed Energy Directorate, Active Remote Sensing Branch of the Advanced Optics and Imaging Division managed the data gathering and analysis program.

Although the 40-year old aircraft may have left Kirtland, the mission may remain here, “We are exploring leasing aircraft from other programs here as there will always be a need for our expertise,” said Lt. Col. Christopher S. Washer, branch chief. @